



Trekking with condors and canyons makes the Wild West unforgettable

Diana Preston explores the natural beauty of one of the world's greatest wildernesses, just a short hop and a skip from Las Vegas

COMPUTER-controlled fountains rising out of an artificial lake on the Las Vegas Strip cavorted to the strains of The Pink Panther. Later we joined the midnight crowds singing along to Don McLean's American Pie at a laser show in Fremont Street, downtown where the first casinos were built. It couldn't be a greater contrast with the arid tranquility of the desert we'd be exchanging it for in just a few hours.

Early next morning we were headed northeast for the start of a 12-day camping and trekking trip to the parks of the American southwest. Before long we were among the wind-eroded mountains of the Mojave Desert where tiny seashells glimmer in the golden brown sand – a reminder that a giant ocean once covered this whole area. Crossing into Utah, the mountains ahead were dusted with snow and beyond rose the yellow-pink sandstone

cliffs of our first destination – the Zion National Park. The Mormon settlers who arrived here in the mid-19th century gave this place of towering, temple-like sandstone rocks its name because they thought it resembled the Kingdom of Heaven.

Zion's earliest inhabitants – people first arrived some 12,000 years ago – tracked mammoths and giant sloths. Today beneath the cottonwoods and willows fringing the swift-flowing Virgin River you see turkeys strutting about, mule deer and bighorn sheep. The park is criss-crossed with walking trails, from a switch-back climb along a knife-edge ridge to Angel's

Landing, suitable only for those with the most superb head for heights. You can meander past waterfalls and make the short walk to Weeping Rock with its hanging gardens of maidenhair ferns and crimson monkeyflowers. The park looks benign but notices warn of flash floods in the narrow-sided canyons whose scoured

walls testify to the violence of these sudden torrents.

To reach Bryce Canyon National Park, we drove north east through a desert landscape smelling deliciously of the thyme and rosemary that thrive here. Bryce is famous for its "hoodoos" – spikes of pink and orange rock eroded by water and ice into fantastical shapes. The legend among the Paiute people who have lived here for centuries is that the hoodoos are men

who so displeased the god Coyote that he turned them to stone. One unimaginative Scottish Mormon once famously deplored Bryce's rock labyrinths as simply "a hell of a place to

lose a cow" – he was wrong. Wandering through the silent hoodoos is an eerie but beautiful experience.

In fact, to an urbanite like me, the immensity of these huge, arid, sun-baked



landscapes can be overwhelming. A day later comes the chance to ride an Appaloosa horse through groves of ponderosa pines and slender, white-trunked aspens in the prairies beneath Boulder Mountain. John, my rancher guide, explained how the native Americans found everything they needed in the beautiful but often harsh environment – yellow

jasper for arrow heads, rosewood for bows, juniper berries to make necklaces and bracelets to chase away bad dreams, and the sharp tips of the yucca plant which a young warrior carried into his first battle because of their supposed protective power.

The high, open expanses of Canyonlands lie to the south, in the heart of the Colorado Plateau. We arrived towards dusk as a Californian condor cruised the pinkening sky. The sense of nature's power and of our own insignificance, human insects perched on the rim of infinity, was absolute.

We camped that night outside the Mormon town of Moab. The sign by The Ole Swimmin' Hole read "Please Don't Chase Our Old Goose". Said goose was a cross-looking dowager that surely few would feel tempted to pester – especially after a dip in the freezing pool. As you'd expect in America the campsite was pristine with hot showers and WiFi. A large area was marked off for RVs big as houses.

ROCK FORMATIONS

The next day we headed across the Arizona border to the famous Monument Valley. Our Navajo guide, Tony, drove us around stone formations with names like the Coffee Pot and the Tea Pot, plus a slender trio of columns named The Three Sisters and one called the King on his Throne, uncannily like a monument of Ancient Egypt. Thousand-year-old depictions of buffaloes, hunters and snakes are still visible on the rock faces. We sat in a hollow formed by centuries of rain where medicine men once collected water, while Tony played his cedar and juniper wood flute. He told tales of skin walkers and shape shifters who can take the form of animals, and of the Navajo belief that there are five worlds of which ours is the fourth and heaven is the fifth.

Driving back through the valley as the sun was sinking, Tony suddenly pulled over and switched off the engine. "Just listen and look," he said. The wind was rising and mini dust storms danced over the desert floor, ruffling the coarse grasses and sending balls of tumbleweed spi-

ralling through air still so hot it felt like someone had left the oven door open. Above our heads fluffy clouds flew across a vast sky turning orange and crimson. All around us, the giant rock shapes were melting into the growing gloom as if they'd only been an illusion.

GRAND CANYON

The next evening brought us finally to the big one – the 277-mile long, one-mile deep Grand Canyon. Perched on the edge and eating slabs of pizza, we watched buzzards ride the currents above the great vastness. A sliver of jade green just visible at the bottom of the canyon was the Colorado River. There was a chill bite to the wind and the locals predicted snow. Next morning, the water was frozen in the standpipes but the skies were clear and blue.

We set off down the steep South Kabob Trail towards the Cedar Ridge viewpoint – a great place to aim for if you don't have the time or inclination for the longer trails.

Descending into the Grand Canyon, even on a well-marked trail, feels precarious. With its sweeping red walls, the canyon seems so awesomely steep. But once below the rim the perspective becomes more benign with bright green meadows in the distance. You start to think it's a bit of a doddle until you read the warning notices about people who thought they could get to the bottom of the canyon and back in a day but died of dehydration or heat stroke. So warned, we were no longer tempted to push on beyond Cedar Ridge.

The views from there were wonderful and we sat for a long time until, finding ourselves being eyeballed by an aggressive-looking squirrel – another notice

told us thirty people a day get bitten by them and feeding them is forbidden – we began the hike back up.

Our trip was nearly over. Later that day, a haiku in the visitor's centre seemed to express the spirit not just of the Grand Canyon but of so many things we'd seen and felt:

"Blue sky eagles fly
Red canyon walls glowing wild
Weary hikers smile."

TREKKING PACKAGE | DETAILS

Diana Preston travelled with Footloose, which runs tours of the national parks throughout the year, staying in lodges when it is too cold to camp. Prices from

around £1,200 excluding flights. For info: 0208 772 3758, www.footloose.com.

● Diana Preston's latest book, written under her pseudonym Alex Rutherford, is *Raiders from the North* – the first of a quintet of historical novels about the Moghul Emperors of India.

INSPIRING NATURE | THE WILDERNESS IN ART

The great wilderness of the American West has inspired artists across the generation, including the ancient people who lived here. More recently, the Arches National Park – so-named because the strong winds blowing off the Rockies for over a million years have sculpted over 1,700 arches and a host of fins and pinnacles from the red sandstone – inspired the American writer and ranger Ed Abbey, author of the clas-

sic Desert Solitaire' to write that scenery " strains credulity". He was right. Towards sunset, stone formations like the Fiery Furnace really look like ablaze. Confronted by the forty-five feet high Delicate Arch – one of the most photographed sights of Utah – you can only stare and wonder. The area has also featured in many films. In the Canyonlands national park we hiked to Dead Horse Point Overlook,

where, in the film, Thelma and Louise took the plunge and as orange, purple and maroon shadows stole over the massive landscape gazed down. Monument Valley to the Navajo reservation there. Monument Valley is so familiar from films – everything from Forrest Gump to Butch Cassidy were shot around here – but even so the sight of rocks the size of cathedrals makes your mind reel.

Mini dust storms danced over the desert floor, ruffling the grasses and sending balls of tumbleweed through the hot air

Bryce is famous for its "hoodoos" – spikes of pink or orange rock eroded into fantastical shapes



The awesome beauty
of the Grand Canyon.

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